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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [EIND](#) [EINV](#) [ETRD](#) [CASC](#) [CVIS](#) [KISL](#)
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SUBJECT: OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL: LOCAL LEADERS DISCUSS
CHALLENGES FOR HOMS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00102
[B](#). DAMASCUS 00093
[C](#). DAMASCUS 00028
[D](#). DAMASCUS 00033
[E](#). 09 DAMASCUS 00797

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: The Charge met a range of political, religious, and business leaders during a January 26-27 visit to Homs. In addition to a long discussion with Homs Governor Iyad Ghazal (ref B), the Charge met Melkite Catholic Archbishop Isidore Battikha, Greek Patriarchate Deputy Patriarch Father Afram, "Awan" (Kuwait-based newspaper) journalist Hanna Aboud, senior leadership at the National Sugar Company, and American citizen wardens. He also toured al-Ardh, a Jesuit-administered farm outside the city offering educational and therapeutic opportunities to mentally challenged children and young adults from nearby rural communities. The only sour note in the trip was the MFA's last-minute cancellation of a scheduled meeting with "al-Ouruba" newspaper Editor-in-Chief Issa Ismael. End Summary.

The Christian Minority

[2](#). (C) Queried about stories of Sunnis being paid to convert to the Shi'a faith, Melkite Catholic Archbishop Isidore Battikha claimed the practice was widespread. He dismissed, however, the idea that these paid conversions reflected a real spiritual or religio-political shift. The real incentive for conversion, he argued, was economic privation, especially in the rural communities. In a separate meeting, the journalist Hanan Aboud said of these conversions that "Iran is the problem; they play a dirty role here," though he was unable to say with certainty whether the Iranians were paying people to convert. He observed there had always been a sizable but quiet Shi'a population in Homs. Now, presumably as a result of growing Iranian regional influence, the Homsy Shi'a were emboldened and more public in their faith.

[3](#). (C) When asked for his reaction on recent public attacks against the Syrian Grand Mufti (ref A) for allegedly insensitive comments about the Prophet Muhammad, Battikha said he was unaware of the rift. "The Damascene Sunni don't accept the Mufti because he is from Aleppo," Battikha sniffed, suggesting urban alliances might be at the root of the problem.

[4](#). (C) In separate meetings, Battikha and Greek Patriarchate

Deputy Patriarch Father Afram both attested to the excellent relationship their churches enjoyed with their Muslim counterparts. Battikha, who served in Damascus for 15 years before transferring to the Homs diocese, argued that Christians and Muslims had stronger relations in Homs than in Damascus. He attributed this to the fact that the two populations lived "closer together" in Homs. Battikha told us he was generally asked to speak in mosques two or three times a year and that he had invited imams to give speeches in his churches. The two groups did not, however, "pray together." Battikha reported there were roughly 45,000 Catholics in his diocese, second in size only to Damascus. When asked whether his congregations were still declining in number due to out-migration from the governate, Battikha assessed the population was now stable. He speculated economic hardship throughout the country made the larger cities less attractive to young people than in the past.

15. (C) Father Afram described his diocese's membership as having stabilized at 150,000 after years of out-migration. Economic difficulties in South America, once a major destination for Homsy Christians, had slowed migration. Like Battikha, Afram characterized the relationship between his church (Syria's largest Christian denomination) and Muslims as being better than in other countries. Though people did not pray together, they participated in common religious celebrations like weddings. Further, Muslims regularly prayed before the tomb of the St. Elian, a third-century martyr from Homs, whose church in the city is the only one in the world named for him.

On the Cusp of Greater Prosperity?

16. (C) During a January 27 tour of the National Sugar Company (NSC, established in 2008), CEO Anlo du Pisani (protect) and Chairman Muhammad Najib Assaf figured the total investment in the NSC, including working capital, to be 160 million dollars, the largest non-oil investment in the country. The company is a "destination refinery" and primarily targets the Syrian sugar market, which du Pisani told us was one of the largest in the world at about 800,000 tons per annum. The U.S. company Cargill, a minority NSC owner, was heavily involved in the plant's construction and in managing the company's raw sugar trade with Brazil. As NSC operations increased, du Pisani and Assaf told us they anticipated moving into the Iraqi sugar market.

17. (C) Commenting on the nearby industrial city of Hissyah (ref B), Du Pisani expressed doubt about the site's long-term viability. NSC had opted not to build in Hissyah because the location lacked a stable water supply. The NSC's decision combined perhaps with the Homs governor's recognition of the economic threat NSC represented to a sugar refinery already operating in Hissyah, upset the local government and set in motion the governor's effort to block the NSC from acquiring land outside Hissyah. According to du Pisani, Assaf's successfully appealed to the President's office -- through the First Lady's family, who are "Homsy" -- which in turn forced Governor Ghazal to back down.

18. (C) Once the NSC's factory was up and running, its output quickly dwarfed that of its Syrian competition. In August 2009, just as world sugar prices were spiking, the Ministry of Trade accused the NSC of trying to monopolize the sugar market and confiscated all its stock, between 4,000 to 6,000 tons of refined sugar (ref E). SARG compensation for the seizure fell well short of its market value and the NSC had sought greater recompense through the Syrian courts. Because trade is viewed as a national security issue, du Pisani complained, the NSC's case landed in Military Court. He doubted whether NSC would get a satisfactory outcome unless company lawyers succeeded in getting the case transferred to a different court. In general, though, du Pisani and Assaf were optimistic about the company's future, noting with satisfaction that the NSC had recently won a tender to supply

sugar to the government cooperatives.

Helping the Handicapped

¶9. (C) The Charge distributed educational gifts to the students at "al-Ardh," a Jesuit-administered farm on the outskirts of Homs providing educational and therapeutic facilities to mentally handicapped children and young adults from the surrounding villages. The children, both Christian and Muslim, work on the farm as part of their education and, in some cases, have the opportunity to work there after graduation. The director, Father Nawras Sammour, said tuition was set at 300 Syrian pounds (\$6.50) per month, though the actual cost per student was closer to 7,200 Syrian pounds (\$158.00). It was important, he explained, that families pay a little so as to feel they were contributing to their child's future. Al-Ardh also offers educational opportunities to local farmers on how to improve agricultural production.

Wardens' Meeting

¶9. (C) American wardens for the Homs region expressed their hope that improved Syrian-U.S. bilateral relations might warrant more consular outreach to the region. Regularly scheduled consular visits to Homs would, they contended, reduce the heavy travel burden on families seeking passport renewals and notarials. The wardens also received guidance from Conoff on new procedures for both non-immigrant visa appointments and American citizen services.

¶10. (C) There was general disapproval among the wardens of recent TSA regulations subjecting Syria to increased security measures at U.S. airports (refs C and D). One warden said it was unacceptable that he, an American citizen who had lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years, would have to "walk through one of those machines" just because he was arriving from Syria. This sentiment was widely encountered throughout

the Homs trip.

¶11. (C) Comment: There was an undeniable vibrancy to the city and people of Homs that belied the city's reputation as somewhat of a backwater. The governor's ambitions for the region (ref B) and the presence of successful businesses like the NSC suggest Homs may very well be on the cusp of greater economic prosperity, providing public-private partnerships do not flounder in a sea of bureaucratic red tape and political egos. Our visit made clear that outside the capital, there is an abiding interest in building stronger links to the U.S. on a political and economic level, and that the Homsy are tracking the improving U.S.-Syria bilateral relationship with great interest and hope. End Comment.

HUNTER